

1st Sunday in Lent – A Cycle
March 9, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Genesis 2,7-9&3,1-7; Romans 5,12-19;Matthew 4,1-11*) Today's first reading tells us the story of the creation of our first parents, their temptation and their fall from grace. The story is more theological than it is historical. It tells us God created the human race to be happy and to share in his grace and friendship. This is symbolized by the Garden of Eden where our first parents had all their needs met. But things didn't turn out as well as God intended. This story presents one explanation for the problem of evil in the world, a problem that St. Paul attempts to explain in today's second reading. In these passages we are told that evil finds its source in our decision to give in to temptation, in our attempt to make our own rules and to use our free will to say "no" to God. In the gospel, Jesus, who has come to save us from evil, has shown us how to resist temptation.

HOMILY:

A wife noticed on her husband's workbench a broken vise. Being a very thoughtful person, she decided to buy him a new one for his birthday. She went to the hardware store and asked the salesman, "Do you have any heavy-duty vices?" "Sorry," he replied. "I gave them all up for Lent." (*Reader's Digest: Laughter, the Best Medicine, pg. 286*)

Getting rid of some of our vices, whether heavy-duty or not, is what the Church is trying to get us to do as we begin this holy season. We have just heard two stories from the Bible: a story about Adam and Eve and a story about the temptations of Jesus. Let me begin by talking about our first parents. Science tells us the first modern humans appeared to have lived about 200,000 years ago and this Scripture passage was written around 3,000 years ago. Since no one was probably around to record what was happening 200,000 years ago, the important message here is not a historical description of the beginning of human life but the theology it teaches us. Behind this story is the concept that God has the authority to tell us what we must do and not do. It is a concept that a greater and greater part of our culture seem to ignore as they create their own rules about what is right and wrong, sinful or not. Our first reading also gives us a typical picture of temptation. Like Adam and Eve, we often find ourselves attracted to something God said we must not have or do, and we become convinced God is just trying to keep us from being happy or fulfilled. The story of Adam and Eve is the story of all of us. Temptation is an illusion, and giving in to it may please us for a moment, but it does not really bring us any lasting happiness. Usually it leads to problems. It certainly affects our relationship with our own conscience (if it's in good working order) and it affects our relationship with God and not in a positive way.

This leads us into the gospel reading about Jesus who showed us that temptation can be overcome with the help of God's word. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us in their gospels that after Jesus was baptized and the Spirit came upon him, the Spirit drove him into the desert where he remained for forty days and was tempted by Satan. It's Matthew and Luke who describe Jesus' temptations for us. They are certainly different

than the run of the mill temptations most of us have to deal with. Jesus' temptations dealt with if and what kind of Son of God he was. Remember that at Jesus' baptism, God the Father spoke about Jesus: that Jesus was his Beloved Son, with whom he was well pleased. So in the temptations, Satan challenged Jesus: "if you are the Son of God, change these stones into bread" or "if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the top of the Temple. Nothing is going to hurt you." The temptations also dealt with his Messianic calling. Satan in effect was saying, "use your special powers to satisfy your hunger, or to get attention from the Jews and their leaders when you come floating down from the top of the Temple, or make yourself powerful over the whole world by adoring me." It is most likely that Jesus was not tempted in exactly this way in the desert, but that he faced actual temptations such as these in the course of his ministry. One example: after Jesus miraculously fed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish, everyone in the crowd wanted to make him their king. He refused their attempt to elevate him to that position, but I'll bet he might have wondered whether he could have had greater influence over many more people if he allowed them to make him their leader and their king. One temptation I'm sure he went through was during his agony in the garden right before his death. Before Judas showed up with the soldiers, he could easily have walked away from it all, given up preaching and healing and just live a quiet life until he died a peaceful death. But he would not walk away from his ongoing mission of teaching and healing and trying to destroy the power of Satan.

What does all this mean for us? It shows the kind of Messiah Jesus would be, humble, faithful, here to serve and not be served, and ready to pay whatever price this would require of him. It shows what kind of Son of God he was, that he loved the Father with his whole heart and soul and mind and strength. It shows that no matter how holy we are and how filled with the Spirit of God, we still have to guard against the temptations of the devil, for he is interested in leading any one of us astray. He goes about like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (*1 Peter 5,8*) It shows that because Jesus experienced temptation, he knows how hard it is to resist and he understands us when we give in to it and is greatly pleased with us when we succeed in resisting it. And he wants us to know that he will help us when we are tempted and he encourages us not to let Satan get the better of us. May this Lent give you greater strength to resist temptation. Amen.

2nd Sunday in Lent – A Cycle

March 16, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Genesis, 12,1-4; II Timothy 1,8b-10; Matthew 17,1-9*) Our first reading takes us back almost 4000 years to the time of Abraham. His name was Abram before God gave him a vocation and a new name. Abram came from an ancient civilization known as Sumer, a settlement near modern day Kuwait. He and his family migrated to the northern part of Syria, near Turkey. After a lengthy stay there, Abram heard God's call to leave his kinfolk behind and move to the land of Canaan - modern day Israel. To make this move, he had to leave behind a prosperous commercial area

to settle in a land that was still relatively primitive and undeveloped. Abraham made this long and difficult journey at the tender age of 75 along with his wife, Sarah, who was 10 years younger. God was telling them, not only to pack up and move to an unknown territory, but to start a family there as well! It was a pure act of faith on the part of Abraham to follow God's call and to believe in the blessings God kept promising him, promises we hear in today's first reading. In the gospel, we have the account of the Transfiguration, which was a promise of Jesus' future glory in the resurrection and future glory for those who follow him faithfully.

HOMILY: Three words begin today's gospel: "after six days..." (Luke says eight days – but who's going to argue over such a small detail). Those three words are not printed in your books but they are in the Bible. We hardly ever hear a reference to time in the gospels. The miracles and teachings that make up Jesus' ministry just seem to follow one after the other without any specific indication as to what order they occurred in or how they were connected. Here, however, Matthew, Mark and Luke want us to know that the transfiguration of Jesus is necessarily connected with some previous event. That event was when Jesus asked his disciples "who do you say that I am?" I'm sure you remember that very important passage. Peter answered correctly as we know, when he said "you are the Christ." (i.e. the Messiah) But when Jesus began to teach them he would have to suffer greatly, they balked at that idea. Peter's resistance to Jesus' teaching about suffering earned him the strongest rebuke to ever come from Jesus when Jesus said to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus then went on to warn the apostles they would have to suffer too: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

It was within a few days that Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John. At that very moment, the apostles could really see Jesus: as Christ or the Messiah AND as he will be in risen glory. They would not have such an opportunity to see Jesus again in glory until after Jesus' resurrection, so Jesus told them not to speak to anyone about the vision until Jesus was raised from the dead. I guess if they did tell any of the others about what they had experienced, the others would have thought they had lost their minds.

The main emphasis here is on Jesus, the one about whom God the Father said: "listen to him." As Jesus had earlier told all the apostles, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me," so there is here in Jesus' transfiguration a message of hope for those who follow him, hope that someday his followers would share in his glory since they have shared in his cross.

It is about these words of God the Father, "listen to him," that I want to say a few words. If we listen to Jesus and follow him perfectly, we would never need to say, "I'm sorry." We wouldn't need to have a season of Lent calling us to repent, to change our ways, to pray and fast and give alms. We wouldn't need to have such a thing as the sacrament of confession or reconciliation.

Usually we have a Penance Service during Advent and Lent. This year, however, our Archbishop asked all the parishes in the Archdiocese to open their doors to make available the sacrament of confession. That's what is happening on Tuesday of this week. We will be open on Tuesday evening from 7:00 to 9:00. Fr. Lammeier and I will be hearing confessions. If it's not a very busy evening, I'll just hear them alone. If you would rather go to another priest, most other parishes will be open for confessions at the same time.

I consider hearing confessions one of the most privileged parts of my ministry. It's as if I could be like Jesus and say to a person who could not walk, arise and walk, so in confession, assuring a person of God's forgiveness and love is bringing them peace and setting them free. Sin and guilt are psychologically and emotionally crippling and forgiveness is freeing.

Can't a person go directly to God? Yes, but signs are helpful in connecting us with God. I can talk to God on my own, but if a voice came out of the heavens to say to me "you are forgiven, I love you as my child," that would be even more reassuring. The priest's voice, "I forgive you your sins," is that voice from the heavens assuring us of God's forgiveness. It is exactly what Jesus said to the apostles on Easter Sunday night: "Peace be with you." Then he breathed on them and said, "receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them, whose sins you retain, they are retained." Of all the things Jesus might have said when he first appeared to his apostles, the power to forgive sins was one of the most important things he wanted them to be able to do. They would be continuing Jesus' work of offering his love and forgiveness of people.

I can almost visibly see the peace that forgiveness can bring, and that's why confession is such a privileged part of my ministry as a priest. It's a great miracle to be able to speak the words of forgiveness. Sometimes I feel blessed to be able to offer a person some good advice. This Tuesday evening from 7:00 to 9:00. We'll keep the lights on for you. Amen.

3rd Sunday in Lent – A Cycle

March 23, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Exodus 17,3-7; Romans 5,1-2.5-8; John 4,5-42*) In our first reading, we hear of an event that takes place as Moses is leading God's people through the desert to the Promised Land. It was probably two or three months since they left Egypt. Twice the Bible tells us God had provided, in a miraculous way, food and water for them. Once again they are demanding water for themselves, their children and their livestock. Moses sounds desperate as to what to do. When he turns to God, God takes care of their needs. God was not going to abandon them now after he had taken them this far. The reading prepares us for the gospel when we hear Jesus offer "living water" to a woman he meets in Samaria as he is traveling in that area. She misunderstands

the term “living water” until Jesus explains it to her. This living water that leads to eternal life he offers to us today as we meet him in faith and prayer.

HOMILY: An ad in the local newspaper read: “For sale, sleeveless wedding gown, white, size 8, veil included. Worn once, by mistake.” Was the woman in Samaria, who had had five husbands, a person who made lots of mistakes or a woman who had buried five husbands? John doesn’t tell us, and Jesus wasn’t ready to tell her she needed to get her life in order. He was interested in bringing her from where she was to a deeper relationship with God. So he starts off with a simple request, asking for a drink of ordinary water. One of the things that is unusual about this whole gospel is that Samaritans hated Jews and vice-versa. They would never use one another’s cups or dishes. And men never talked with women in public. Another thing that is unusual about the gospel is that Jesus met her at the well in the middle of the day. In that culture it was customary for the women to come to the well early in the morning. Quite possibly the woman in the gospel was looked down upon or maybe spoken to as if she were some kind of low life by the other more righteous women in the village and she was trying to avoid them. But ignoring all these cultural taboos, Jesus simply asks for a cool drink of plain water. John doesn’t tell us if he got the drink of water because before she knew it, Jesus was talking with her on a purely spiritual level, offering her living water, like a spring of water welling up to eternal life. It’s interesting when we analyze this encounter - how Jesus could take a simple, ordinary object or idea and move it to a higher spiritual level. We saw how he did it with the request for a drink of water. The subject then changes when the woman talks about where a person should worship God, whether on Mt. Gerizim (a mountain near Jacob’s well) or in Jerusalem. Jesus says the day will come when it won’t matter about what mountain we choose to worship on but that we will worship the Father in Spirit and truth. Jesus does the same thing with ordinary food. When the apostles bring him some and encourage him to eat, he tells them there are more important things in life than having something to eat - as important as that is. Jesus tells his apostles that doing God’s will nourishes us at a more profound and more lasting level of our being. Lastly, Jesus comments that it’s almost time for the harvest, only to point out the spiritual harvest that is about to happen as he sees all the village people (people hungering for the word of life) coming down the road to meet him. Jesus also changed this woman, from someone who was most likely seen as a sinner, into a preacher of the gospel when she announced to the town’s folks about this special man she had met. Notice how John subtly reveals who Jesus is. In offering living water, he was claiming to be greater than the patriarch, Jacob. The woman came to discover Jesus was a prophet because he could see exactly what kind of person she was. He admitted to being more than a prophet when he said he was *the* Messiah - a rare admission in the gospels, especially among Matthew, Mark and Luke. Lastly, the town’s people who came to meet him acclaims Jesus as the Savior of the world.

Today in the gospel we meet a woman, a woman who most likely had the reputation of being a sinful person. Jesus was often criticized for associating with sinners, but that didn’t keep him from reaching out to her for a simple favor – all the while being aware that he wanted to do a favor for her. Little did she know what that one day in her life would be like. In the middle of the day, she went out to get some water from the town

well as she most likely did every day and, before she knew it, she was recruited as an apostle, announcing to her whole town about this outstanding person she met and inviting the people to come to meet him. Life is that way for all of us sometimes. We never know what is around the corner. Let's pray that it's always something good waiting for us and if it is the Lord we encounter it will be good. We just have to be a bit careful how involved we want to be with him. He has shown how he can capture us completely: heart, soul, mind and strength. He may ask us for a glass of water and before we know it we are preaching the gospel to all our neighbors, friends and relatives. Amen.

4th Sunday in Lent – A Cycle

March 30, 2014

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading takes us back 1000 years before Christ. At that time Israel was being ruled by King Saul, Israel's first king. Saul had not pleased God, so God sent Samuel, his prophet, to anoint someone else who would be the future king after Saul died. That king would be David, son of Jesse from Bethlehem. All of Jesse's sons had the dignity and physical characteristics of potentially good leaders, but the judgment Samuel had to make could not be guided by what he saw with his eyes. He had to see with his mind and heart under the inspiration of God's Spirit. This reading from the Book of Samuel prepares us for the gospel where Jesus healed a man who was born blind by giving him the ability to see with his eyes. The man gradually came to see with his mind and heart who Jesus really was. He is contrasted with the Jewish leaders who had eyes to see, but who were blinded in their hearts by jealousy, pride and arrogance.

HOMILY: A pastor of a non-Catholic church had to be fitted for a set of dentures. The following Sunday he preached for only 5 minutes. The Sunday after that he preached about 7 minutes. The third Sunday, he preached for one and a half hours. His parishioners asked him what was going on. He said for two weeks his teeth hurt him so much after seeing the dentist that he could talk for just a few minutes. But on the third Sunday he accidentally picked up his wife's false teeth and couldn't stop talking. (This doesn't apply to any of the wonderful women I know.) Today's gospel is one of my favorite readings, but it is long. So don't worry, for that reason I'm not going to talk for a long time.

I want to first of all point out an important lesson at the beginning of today's gospel. It is a lesson on suffering – it makes clear to us that suffering is part of being human and is not necessarily a punishment for sin. Sometimes our sinful ways bring us suffering, but all suffering cannot be traced back to some sin we had committed. My grandmother was a very holy person, but in her later years she became bed ridden and she always thought God was punishing her for something she did. Jesus said the man's blindness was not due to any evil thing he or his parents had done. It was just part of the human condition.

Now, let's get to the point of the gospel. The point is that Jesus is the light of the world. He gave sight to the blind, but more than that, he gives light to our minds and hearts – light that guides us through life to eternal life. If we do not follow his light, we will be like the Pharisees who could see with their eyes but were blind in their minds and hearts. As the old saying goes: “there are none so blind as those that will not see.” (*Matthew Henry*)

I want you to notice the gradual insight the blind man developed about Jesus. The first time he spoke of Jesus, he said “the *man* called Jesus anointed my eyes...” Then when the Pharisees questioned him about Jesus, the man said, “He is a *prophet*.” He has to have come *from God* or he would not be able to do anything. Lastly, when Jesus asked if he believed in Jesus as the Son of Man, the man said, “I do believe” and he *worshipped him*.” A practical lesson here is that believing and worshipping go together. Too many people today are willing to say “I believe” but they seldom have time to worship. The day of the Lord is filled with everything else but time for the Lord.

Although we may not be blind like the Pharisees, if we were we wouldn't be here, sometimes we are like the parents of the man born blind in that we hesitate to talk about what we believe because our friends may not like us or think less of us. Notice how the parents of the man born blind wouldn't say anything when they were questioned. They just said: “talk to my son, he's old enough to speak for himself.”

Let us pray that we continue to come to know Christ as our light, and not to be intimidated by anyone because we believe in him. Amen.